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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001176

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, H
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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SUBJECT: SENATOR FEINGOLD'S MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER
THAKSIN

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On February 20, Senator Russell Feingold (D-WI) accompanied by Ambassador Boyce called on Prime Minister Thaksin. Thaksin said the relationship with the U.S., as exemplified by our close cooperation following the December 2004 tsunami, was excellent. The discussion focused on violence in southern Thailand; the disappearance of human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit and other human rights concerns; F-16s, Hmong refugees from Laos; and Thaksin's domestic political challenges. Senator Feingold expressed serious concern over the situation in Burma. END SUMMARY

SOUTHERN THAILAND - THAKSIN PLAYS COP

12. (C) During a February 20 meeting with Prime Minister Thaksin at Government House, Senator Feingold expressed concern over the ongoing violence affecting far southern Thailand and asked for the Prime Minister's assessment of the situation as well as his plans to work with the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). Thaksin emphasized that there was no evidence of intentional terrorist involvement in the South and that Malay separatism was a primary factor behind the violence. There was a committed group of armed militants who used separatist propaganda about the unique history of the region to manipulate youths to fight for an independent homeland.

13. (C) Thaksin claimed the government and the NRC were now "heading in the same direction," after the NRC's initial failure to understand the complexity of the situation. The NRC believed the violence was rooted in the deep feeling of "injustice" felt by southern Muslims who felt that they had been mistreated historically by the Thai state. Both he and the NRC understood that they needed to address the concerns of ethnic Malay Thais. "We need to look into their hearts."

14. (C) When asked about reports of heavy-handed tactics in the South, Thaksin defended Thai security practices. He described the Krue Se incident of April 2004 as an instance of security forces being involved in "hot pursuit" of militants. The Tak Bai incident of October 2005 was the result of a lack of proper military transportation. The deaths at Tak Bai resulted from suffocation, and not from the actions of security forces. He blamed the militants for deliberately manipulating the Tak Bai incident in order to provoke a dramatic confrontation with security forces.

15. (SBU) Thaksin said economic underdevelopment was a factor in the violence because of resentment among ethnic Malays of the better economic conditions on the Malaysian side of the border. The Islamic education system contributed to the poor economic conditions in the region because Islamic schools did not equip their graduates with job skills.

16. (C) Thaksin boasted several times that he had personally interrogated some of the captured militants. Most had been manipulated by separatist ideas or paid to commit violence. There was absolutely no evidence of connections between the captured militants and JI or Al-Qaeda. Thaksin claimed that under questioning the captured militants readily confessed their involvement in the insurgency and that harsh interrogation techniques were not required to obtain information from them.

SOMCHAI - "A HEART ATTACK DURING QUESTIONING"

17. (C) Senator Feingold asked about the investigation into the disappearance of human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit. Thaksin said the inquiry into the disappearance would finish in mid-March and that additional arrest warrants of police officers would be issued by the Department of Special Investigation (DSI). The findings so far implicated some mid-level police officers in the disappearance. The police allegedly brought Somchai to the Criminal Suppression Division for questioning. While under interrogation Somchai had a heart attack and died. After the heart attack police

panicked and took Somchai's remains outside of Bangkok where the body was incinerated. The police did not know Somchai had a heart condition. Thaksin claimed that Somchai had not been interrogated harshly, however, the police were unaware he had a heart condition and Somchai was without his heart medication. Thaksin emphasized that these actions were from "working level officers."

EJK

18. (C) Senator Feingold asked for an explanation of reports that Thai security forces had been involved in other extra-judicial killings, especially during the 2003 "war on drugs." Thaksin denied these reports, saying that Thai forces respected the rule of law. The number of killings during the "war on drugs" had been exaggerated and most involved drug kingpins "cutting-off" underlings in order to silence them. Thaksin complained that media reports, especially the Thai English language press, were unfairly critical and unreliable. "The papers are readable, but not quotable."

BURMA AND ASSK

19. (C) Senator Feingold asked about current Thai policies towards Burma and strongly urged additional Thai efforts to press for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). Thaksin said that ASEAN leaders had used tough language with the Burmese during the December 2005 ASEAN summit, a first for ASEAN. He complained that the Burmese had failed to tell even ASEAN members about their plans to move their capital. Thaksin offered Bangkok as a possible venue for the Burmese regime to engage with the international community. Senator Feingold emphasized the importance of Thai engagement with the Burmese to secure the release of ASSK. Thaksin said the SPDC would not hold ASSK "forever" but would wait until after the national reconciliation process was finished. After being pressed, Thaksin he said he would try to talk to Than Shwe personally about ASSK.

HMONG REFUGEES

10. (C) Senator Feingold thanked the Prime Minister for Thailand's cooperation on Hmong refugees, especially the recent case involving 27 Hmong children. Thaksin said that the Lao were difficult to work with and acted defensively. The case of the 27 children was a good example of this. He complained that illegal immigration from Laos was an ongoing problem for Thailand.

REGIONAL SECURITY, CHINA

11. (C) Thaksin said that Thailand was concerned about piracy in the Strait of Malacca and would support collective security efforts, although it remained primarily an issue for the littoral states. He noted that pirates from Aceh were of particular concern. Regarding China, Thaksin said bilateral relations were very close, particularly under his administration.

FTA

12. (SBU) Thaksin said he wanted a "fair" FTA with the U.S., suggesting it would require sacrifices from both sides in order to enjoy the overall benefits an FTA would bring. He quipped, "you Americans like won-ton soup, but you don't like one-ton pickups." The negotiations with the U.S. are very complicated, especially the areas regarding pharmaceuticals and financial services. The Bank of Thailand was particularly worried about some of the FTA's financial services provisions.

F-16s

13. (SBU) Senator Feingold made a strong push for the Thais to purchase/upgrade U.S. F-16s rather than Swedish or Russian aircraft. Thaksin said he had asked the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Commander Chalit for a final recommendation, which he expected within a week. Thailand was seriously looking at Russian planes because the Russians were offering a barter deal and because the sale would open up new markets to Thai agricultural exports. Thaksin said there were two components to the aircraft deal -- mid-life upgrades for existing F-16s and procurement of some new aircraft to replace the RTAF's aging F-5s. The RTAF would purchase mid-life upgrades for a number of F-16s, but Thailand would not buy new U.S. aircraft unless a better deal was offered. Thaksin believed the purchase of Russian aircraft should not affect cooperation with the U.S. Ambassador Boyce reminded Thaksin that a purchase of Russian aircraft could in fact

affect technology transfers and raise questions over interoperability with U.S. forces. Thaksin said access to technology was very important for Thailand and urged the U.S. to offer better terms.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S.

14. (SBU) Thaksin highlighted the overall positive image of the U.S. in Thailand, noting that many Thais -- including both he and the Foreign Minister -- were the products of the U.S. educational system. Most Thais did not have strong opinions about the U.S. war on terror; however, there was a general negative feeling about the U.S. invasion of Iraq, especially among Thai Muslims.

POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN THAILAND

15. (SBU) Senator Feingold asked the Prime Minister about recent challenges from opposition figures to his government. Thaksin downplayed opposition efforts to oust him, calling recent protests "part of the normal democratic process." Thai political elites got bored quickly because of the history of short lived governments in the past. His rural base remained strong, and even in Bangkok he still enjoyed more support than the opposition. An extraordinary session of parliament would be convened on March 6, followed by a debate from March 8-10, in order to refute opposition charges.

16. (U) Senator Feingold's office cleared this message.

BOYCE